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We write as Catholic theologians, academics and ministers concerned for our nation and for the integrity of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. We write to hold up aspects of the Church's social doctrine that are profoundly relevant to the challenges our nation faces at this moment in history, yet are in danger of being ignored. At a moment when the ideas of *Atlas Shrugged* influence public debate and policy, we write to proclaim the Catholic truth that the stewardship of common good rests upon all of our shoulders together. This is a responsibility we dare not shrug. We fulfill this obligation in myriad ways, but indispensably among them, through the policies of our government. We highlight these principles of the Church's social doctrine in the hope that their substance will better influence our political and policy debates.

## A Tipping Point

America is at a tipping point where the traditional commitment of our government to protecting and advancing the common good is in very real danger of being dismantled for generations. Members of the "Tea Party," libertarians, Ayn Rand followers and other proponents of small government have brought libertarian views of government into the mainstream; legitimating forms of social indifference. After decades of anti-government rhetoric and "starve the beast" tax cuts, some even appear to exploit predictable fiscal problems to establish a privatized, libertarian order that reduces society to a collection of individuals and shrinks the common good to fit the outcomes achievable by private, for profit firms.

## A Threat to the Church's Teachings

Congressman Paul Ryan's candidacy for Vice President brings the threat of this social philosophy home to the Church. We do not question Paul Ryan's faith. We

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are concerned however, that defenders of Ryan have gone beyond highlighting the aspects of Catholic moral teaching with which his political positions are laudably consistent, to argue that his Ayn Rand "inspired" individualist and anti-government vision and the policies they inform are themselves legitimately Catholic. They are not.

We do not write to oppose Ryan's candidacy or to argue there are not legitimate reasons for Catholics to vote for him. Our concern is that Ryan and his Catholic supporters, must be informed—as prochoice candidates and Catholics who vote for them are perennially and appropriately reminded—that some of his positions are fundamentally at odds with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

We fear the Church's legitimate disagreement with the inadequate exemptions in the Obama administration's contraceptive insurance mandate will lead some bishops to avoid giving due scrutiny to Ryan's disagreements with or misunderstandings of the Church's social teaching. This would be a tragic failure of episcopal oversight. Presidential campaigns have enormous power to legitimate their messages. If Congressman Ryan's Randian vision is allowed to be promoted as Catholic, many believers will be confused and our nation will be deprived of the Church's full wisdom.

Congressman Ryan has forthrightly proclaimed his inspiration by Ayn Rand. This was no passing youthful phase. Few politicians have offered so comprehensive a statement of a social philosophy and shown its links to their policy priorities and political strategies as Congressmen Ryan did in his remarkable 2005 address to the Atlas Society. In addition to naming Rand as the "one thinker" whom he would credit for his entering public service, he stated that he repeatedly returns to *Atlas Shrugged* to "check my premises so that I know that what I'm believing and doing and advancing are square with the key principles of individualism." From this perspective he judged "defined benefit" safety net programs such as Social Security and Medicare to be "collectivist" and "socialist based." He called for privatizing of Social Security and Medicare into individually funded programs in order to "change the dynamics in this society" and to form "believers in the individualist capitalist system." [1] These values and policy priorities are evident throughout the several budget resolutions he has authored. Defined benefit programs are an explicit target in themselves because they foster "dependence"—a term he invokes 5 times in his 2013 budget resolution. Congressman Ryan's concerns about the growing Federal debt are commendable. It is clear, however, that he had a prior philosophical bias against publically funded safety net programs independent of these fiscal concerns. Given these values, it seems reasonable to conclude that Ryan's deep cuts to Medicaid, Medicare and food stamps are policy priorities themselves. Thus, it is not surprising, that the savings achieved by these cuts are swamped by revenue losses resulting from massive new tax cuts for high earners and corporations.

Ryan's rejection of Rand's atheism is laudable, as are his public avowal of the thought of Thomas Aquinas and Catholic social doctrine. We do not question the sincerity of his convictions, but must note that a shift from the social philosophy of Ayn Rand to the social doctrine of the Catholic Church is a radical change indeed. Such a conversion would take much time and reflection. Congressman Ryan's policies have remained unchanged through this shift. This suggests that they may in fact still be more indebted to the social principles of Rand than to Aquinas and the Catholic Church. Clarification of the substance of Catholic social doctrine will assist him and other Catholics in discernment of these policies.

## Prudence Misused

Catholic promoters of Ryan's policies often invoke "prudence" to argue that since bishops are not competent to judge the details of policy proposals, there is no properly "Catholic" problem with his policies. This distorts the authentic Catholic meaning of prudence. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines prudence as "right reason in action." It is the virtue through which we "apply moral principles to particular cases." [2] In St. Thomas Aquinas's words, no one "can properly apply

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one thing to another unless he knows both the thing to be applied and the thing to which it has to be applied." [3] Thus, prudence demands both knowledge of the principles of Catholic Social Doctrine and honest attention to the details and realistic consequences of policies.

Aquinas also warned that prudence is a risky business. We are perennially tempted to use it as a cover for achieving goals contrary to our professed principles. Aquinas taught that the *vice* of "craftiness" often masquerades as prudence. Craftiness uses "means that are not true, but fictitious and counterfeit" to achieve its ends "whether good or bad." [4] For that reason, we must always scrutinize the principles that inspire our actions in prudential matters. Are our actions and policies consistent with the ideals we proclaim? Or would an honest assessment reveal they are guided by less laudable motives?

## Prudence and Principle, Love and Truth:

The Church's social doctrine is not simply an imperative to believe in God and help the poor, for which any proposal can claim equal legitimacy by promising positive consequences. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states that the Church teaches specific principles of social doctrine.

These principles of the Church's social doctrine "concern the reality of society in its entirety: from close and immediate relationships to those mediated by politics, economics and law; from the relationships among communities and groups to relations between peoples and nations." [5]

A Catholic use of prudence requires evaluating the compatibility between policy proposals and these substantial teachings.

Benedict XVI expressed the true challenge of Christian prudence in his great social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*: the truth of Christian love must animate all dimensions of society. *Caritas* is more than a generic inspiration, if love is *truth*, it must give specific form to our actions.

Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way. In a culture without truth, this is the fatal risk facing love. It falls prey to contingent subjective emotions and opinions, the word "love" is abused and distorted, to the point where it comes to mean the opposite.

Without truth, without trust and love for what is true, there is no social conscience and responsibility, and social action ends up serving private interests and the logic of power, resulting in social fragmentation, especially in a globalized society at difficult times like the present. [6]

## Prudence and Policy

Prudence also requires consideration of the full range of options available and an honest assessment of the outcome of policy proposals. After decades of tax cuts, honesty requires considering revenue increases in addition to program cuts. Government programs are not perfect and need to be improved. Proposals to slash or eliminate programs without proposing alternatives, however, is exactly the kind of indifference Jesus condemned in the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Rich Man and Lazarus.

## 5 Principles of Catholic Social Doctrine Most in Danger of Being Forgotten or

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# Distorted

There are many principles of the Church's social doctrine that are effectively communicated and widely known. Chief among these is the dignity and sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. Although this fundamental doctrine is far from adequately implemented in our laws, there is little or no confusion about the Church's teaching on this matter. We offer here a list of principles of Catholic social doctrine—not to argue their priority over others—but because we judge these to be the most in danger of being ignored or distorted in contemporary public debate.

## 1. The Catholic view of the human person is social not individual.

Congressman Ryan has stated that he learned from Rand to view all policy questions as a "fight of individualism versus collectivism." [7] The Catholic Church does not espouse "individualism," but rather sees it as an error as destructive as collectivism. [8] Blessed John Paul II described "individualism" as a dimension of the "Culture of Death" arising from an "eclipse of the sense of God." [9] The human person is "by its innermost nature, a social being. ["10] We are radically dependent upon and responsible for one another. Again, in the words of John Paul II, "We are all really responsible for all." This truth of the human person is tied to the central doctrines of the Church. It reflects the very "intimate life of God, one God in three Persons." [11]

## 2. Government has an essential role to play in protecting and promoting the common good.

The error of individualism leads to a mistaken understanding of the role of government. For too long politicians have echoed Ronald Reagan's misleading mantra "Government is the Problem." The Catholic Church, on the contrary, because of its social understanding of the human person, considers government to be as "necessary" for human nature as the family. The state exists to "defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens, and intermediate bodies." [12] Thus, while the Church does not offer a specific blueprint for policy, it does view our government's action on behalf of the common good a positive good in itself.

Catholic apologists for small government repeatedly invoke a single paragraph from John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* which cautions against the excesses of a "social assistance state" ignoring the decades-long papal consensus supporting social insurance and welfare systems. In the same document, John Paul described the "intervention of governmental authority" on behalf of the defenseless as "an elementary principle of sound political organization" taught by the Church for a century. [13] John Paul later stated "One can only rejoice" that "States set up social welfare systems to assist families...and pension funds for retirees." These express a sense of national "responsibility" and "solidarity." [14]

## 3. The doctrine of subsidiarity both limits government and demands that it act when local communities cannot solve problems on their own.

Subsidiarity has both negative and positive dimensions. Negatively, it limits overreach by government (as well as other large organizations, including corporations). Positively, the concept (which means "help" or "assistance") requires that government act when problems cannot be solved on the local level.

Ryan has invoked subsidiarity to justify devolving management of Medicaid to states thereby ending centralization "in the hands of federal bureaucrats." At the same time, his budget cuts Medicaid by \$750 billion over ten years, a policy that will cut healthcare for an estimated 14 to 27 million Medicaid recipients. [15]

The broader outlines of the budget plan will radically reduce the size of government and consequently cut funding for private and religious safety net providers such as Catholic Charities who depend upon federal grants and contracts for much of their funding. This fails the positive obligation under

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subsidiarity to render needed assistance.

4. **The "preferential option for the poor" demands both individual and collective action, including the acts of the state.** In the words of John Paul II, the preferential option for the poor affects "our daily life as well as our decisions in the political and economic fields;" placing demands upon individuals as well as "leaders of nations." [16]

The portrayal of the Last Judgment in the Gospel of Matthew is a judgment of the *nations* based on how they treat the "least of these." This was the "central moral measure" applied by the USCCB in its evaluation of the Ryan budget. "The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty should come first." [17]

Ryan, like Rand, sees "dependency" as our most serious problem. Thus, he describes his understanding of preferential option as "don't keep people poor, don't make people dependent on government so that they stay stuck at their station in life." [18]

It should go without saying that poverty is not caused primarily by a too generous government safety net that becomes in Ryan's words, "a hammock that lulls able-bodied citizens into lives of complacency and dependency." [19] It is much easier to cut government programs than to help people out of long-term poverty as the very mixed results of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act prove. [20] Ryan's 2012 budget achieves 62% of its designated savings from cuts to programs for low-income families and individuals while cutting the top marginal tax rate and the corporate tax rate. [21] It is impossible to justify this as a serious exercise of the preferential option for the poor.

5. **Economic forces must be reckoned among any serious account of the threats to society and human dignity.** Ryan's budget resolutions speak mainly of overbearing government and free individuals acting in a private sector whose justice is never questioned. It is hard to reconcile this vision with the history of the past forty years, in which globalization has deindustrialized America and deregulation has increased the power of private corporations. At the same time, unions, which official Catholic teaching has long recognized as indispensable to the rights of workers and the common good, have been severely weakened. [22] Whatever the threat of government power, any adequate response to our challenges must address the facts of economic power as well. Modern papal social doctrine has addressed both threats since its inception.

In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI has offered an analysis more probing than that offered by either political party.

Benedict speaks of the loss of state power in the face of globalization and calls for the development of new forms of government engagement.

In our own day, the State finds itself having to address the limitations to its sovereignty imposed by the new context of international trade and finance, which...has altered the political power of States....[T]heir powers...need to be prudently reviewed and remodelled so as to enable them, perhaps through new forms of engagement, to address the challenges of today's world. [23]

Benedict continues the century-long papal teaching that the market alone cannot address the needs of the common good:

Economic activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of *commercial logic*. This needs to be *directed towards the pursuit of the common good*, for which the political community in particular must also take responsibility. Therefore, it must be borne in mind that grave imbalances are produced when economic action, conceived merely as an engine for wealth

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creation, is detached from political action, conceived as a means for pursuing justice through redistribution. [24]

Benedict offers a description of the temptation to reduce the social safety net that reads like an analysis of the Ryan Budget:

From the social point of view, systems of protection and welfare... are finding it hard and could find it even harder in the future to pursue their goals of true social justice in today's profoundly changed environment....[T]he market has prompted new forms of competition between States as they seek to attract foreign businesses.... These processes have led to a *downsizing of social security systems* as the price to be paid for seeking greater competitive advantage in the global market, with consequent grave danger for the rights of workers, for fundamental human rights and for the solidarity associated with the traditional forms of the social State. Systems of social security can lose the capacity to carry out their task, both in emerging countries and in those that were among the earliest to develop, as well as in poor countries. Here budgetary policies, with cuts in social spending often made under pressure from international financial institutions, can leave citizens powerless in the face of old and new risks. [25]

## Conclusion:

The momentous challenges facing our nation cry out for the full wisdom of the Church's social doctrine. We live at time when the social indifference of libertarian thought is achieving broad cultural legitimacy and political power. This vision of the human person and society are fundamentally at odds with the Gospel and the principles of Catholic Social Doctrine. Legitimate disagreements with the Obama administration must not lead the Church to edit the fullness of its teachings for political expediency. Our political obligations as Catholics go beyond choosing a candidate for which to vote. In the words of *Faithful Citizenship*, "our participation should help transform the party to which we belong." [26] Ours is a moment that demands the fullness of the Church's teachings as few others have. To be truly prophetic, the Church—bishops, clergy and lay faithful—must proclaim the fullness of its message to all parties, movements, and powers.

## Footnotes

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